Fair Isn’t Always Equal

*Chapter 1*

I found the debate over whether differentiated instruction could actually be doing students a disservice by making things too easy for them an interesting one. In the face of mounting pressure for traditional academic success and exceptance to top colleges, a lot of emphasis is placed on independence and personal achievement. While these are undoubtably positive elements of education, they can sometimes make learning an isolating experience for students and unintentially do away with some of the collabortive and creative elements of education. Differentiated instruction brings these factors back and shows how teacher involvement and diverse instruction can bring about those desired results while allowing students to become well-rounded learners capable of adapting to varied learning situations. Paying close attention the ways that differentiated instruction affects students both in and outside of the classroom is a skill that I will bring into the classroom with me. Everything teachers do has the ability to have long-term effects on a student, and this is something that it is extremely important to remember. I also learned a lot about how differentiated instruction really is necessary for a successful classroom. Up until now, I think we were sort of given the impression that it was only used from time to time, or pulled out of the teacher tool box during difficult situations. But so much of what teachers do on a daily basis is differentiated by nature, without having to attach a label to it. Effective teaching requires instructors to constantly evolve and adapt their methods, often right in the moment and without time for extensive preparation. These intrinsic skills are a big portion of what differentiated instruction is all about, and that makes the whole thing seem a lot less intimidating.

*Chapter 2*

Learning about the different levels of understanding that students need to achieve in the classroom is very useful to a teacher. It is easy to think that showing they can perform a certain skill is all the knowledge necessary for them to really understand a topic, but it does go a lot deeper. I didn’t realize until reading this chapter just how complicated it is to determine whether or not a student has mastered the content, but understanding that it takes more than just one or two exercises to have proof of it is something I will definitely take into the classroom with me. This chapter taught me a lot about the many different ways that it is necessary for students to be able to apply what they have learned. Most modern teachers know that rote memorization and useless busy work doesn’t promote the kind of active learning that we should be striving for, but it was helpful to learn that even hands-on, active assignments and activities aren’t always enough to judge how well a student has mastered the content. This chapter enforces the idea that assessment must be an ongoing process that measures all stages of learning and all aspects of it. Knowledge and content mastery are not one-dimensional things, and this chapter taught me a lot about appreciating the different ways of applying that mastery. When I am teaching a class, I will try to remember that what matters most is not my students simply regurgitating the information I teach them, but their ability to express that knowledge when I am not around to lead them through it.

*Chapter 3*

This chapter had a lot of information about assessment to take in. I think the most important thing I learned from it was that there are countless different kinds of assessments meant to serve many different purposes. The three basic types of assessments (pre-, formative, and summative) were really helpful to learn about. I didn’t realize that assessment was something that necessarily took place in the midst of a lesson, but now that I have learned about it it makes a lot of sense. I think using tests results to determine what direction the content should go in is a really good idea, because it keeps the end goal in mind and makes sure that everything is driven towards a purpose. It is really easy to think of assessments as being the end of a teacher’s work for a particular unit, but the work never really ends, and tests and projects are meant to be another step along the way towards successful content mastery. Learning is a constantly evolving process and assessments need to work cooperatively with instruction to achieve that. I think it is also really important to make sure that assessments have real-world applications. One of the most irritating things about high school was when the material we were being tested on didn’t seem to have any real purpose. It made it seem like our time was being wasted, and that is something I really want to look out for when I am a teacher. The chapter’s guidelines for avoiding “fluff” assignments were really helpful for that. In order to keep content goal-oriented, it is important to always remember the end result envisioned by each particular assignment, and the same thing with assessments. Tests and other evalulative projects need to have just as much purpose as the work leading up to them.

*Chapter 4*

On page 48, the author mentions how students often aim for the second or third level of achievement when given a ranked rubric, either because they do not think they are capable of reaching the highest level or because they do not want to put in the extra work required to get there. I think this says a lot about assessment, and its implications for how we grade our students are things that I will take into the classroom with me. It is absolutely necessary for teachers to make their students feel confident that they can perform at a high level, and they must also push they to go beyond what is just good enough for a decent grade. I think rubrics can be helpful for that by giving students clear, specific instructions on how to reach a high level of achievement on a particular assignment, but I think holistic rubrics can be useful too because they put the attention on the learning process behind the project as opposed to just the end result grade. The student self-assessment section was really informative too. As an English teacher, a lot of the work I do with my students will center around writing assignments and personal responses to reading, and I think there is a place for self-assessment in both of those situations. I really like the idea of having students keep a reading journal to help them keep track of how they felt about the text, because it would get them into the habit of evaluating their own thoughts about the class material and could even lead into a cumulative assignment at the end of the unit.

*Chapter 5*

The whole concept of tiering is a little bit confusing to me, and I think I would need to learn more about it in order to figure out how to implement it in my classroom. But the chapter did have a lot of good ideas about how to give students choices for how they want to be assessed, and how to also appeal to the many different learning styles in a differentiated classroom. I think the idea of a learning contract between a student and their teacher could be a good thing, because it keeps the student personally accountable for their work and gives them the needed autonomy. But I can also see how such a long list of rules and requirements could be overwhelming and off-putting to a student, so I think that kind of rubric should be used sparingly and only when the teacher knows that it will be very beneficial to the particular student. The ‘change the verb’ form of tiering is something that I would definitely use in my future classroom. I had never realize before how much impact the wording of a question or assignment could have on the way a student perceives it, but it really does make a big difference. Being as specific as possible really helps students get the most out of the assessment, and it encourages direct, purpose-driven thinking. Any project or assessment based off of a question or prompt should be active thought-provoking, because an assessment that is designed in a way that does not actively engage student thinking does not showcase their best work.

*Chapter 6*

This chapter had a lot of very practical and specific advice for how to plan good assessments, and that is the kind of stuff that I will definitely remember when I am a teacher. I didn’t realize that so much thought was put into the kinds of questions that teachers ask on tests, but it was really informative to see how detailed and intricate they actually are. Paying attention to the way test questions are formatted is a great way to differentiate instruction too. I really liked the part of the chapter where the author said that the only way tests can give us an accurate picture of student achievement is to make questions that they actually have a good chance of answering. The test is meant to measure students’ knowledge of the content, not their ability to play word games. From my time in high school, I remember that nothing was more frustrating than feeling as though the teacher was trying to trick us with test questions. It distracts you from remembering what you are being tested on and it adds pressure and anxiety that can impede test taking. I thought the paragraph showing what goes through a student’s mind when they are stressed about a poorly-worded question was really eye-opening, and when I am a teacher I will definitely remember how I felt taking tests as a student. I’ve learned a lot more now about the different types of test questions, and I can see how important it is to differentiate not just instruction, but assessment too.